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**SPECIAL PIRKEI AVOT SERIES**

# Rav Kook on Pirkei Avot 2:18

## The Spiritual Significance of the *Shema*

**“Rav Shimon says: Be scrupulous with reciting the Shema and prayer...”  
(Avot 2:18)**

The basic understanding of the above teaching is that this is a warning to be punctual in reading the *Shema* and praying at the proper time (*Rashi*). However, let us examine another layer of meaning regarding the *Shema* exquisitely articulated by Rav Avraham Yitzchak Hakohen Kook.

In thinking about the significance of the *Shema*, it is worthwhile noting that the very first subject addressed in the Talmud is the law and meaning of its recitation. Indeed, the *Shema* is seen as fundamental in that it represents a Jew’s declaration in belief in one God.



Rav Abraham Isaac Kook zt”l

Strikingly, Rav Kook, in his opening comment in his work *Ain Aya* (*Berachot* 1:1), draws our attention to another critical dimension of the *Shema* which is often overlooked. The first Mishna (*Berachot* 1:1) delineates the time that the evening *Shema* must be recited. Instead of simply saying “nightfall”, the Mishna says that it is the time that the Priests enter to eat their Terumah. Why then does the Mishna associate the *Shema* recited at night with the *kohanim* privately eating their sacred food?

Rav Kook suggested that the night is symbolic of the exilic experience of the Jew. The Jew scattered to the four corners of the world is characterized by feelings of vulnerability and danger. In these hostile settings we as a people faced an immense threat to our physical and spiritual well-being. Thus we have been forced to focus on protecting ourselves in order to withstand the turbulent waves which have threatened our very survival. Thus we have acted as “priests,” privately observing the rituals and holding fast to the Torah in a frightening and contentious situation. The nighttime *Shema* is symbolic of declaring our faith internally and privately to our people in order to bolster our faith and

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commitment to God.

However, at a time of *geula* (redemption), when the stature of Israel will be elevated, the *Shema* recited in the morning contains a very different theme and message. Namely, it is a message of the oneness of God that will ultimately be heard by all the nations. The nations of the world will recognize that the light of Israel is indeed the guiding light for all mankind. (*Berachot Ain Aya* 1:1)

At first glance Rav Kook's novel interpretation of the recitation of the *Shema* appears to reflect his unique emphasis on the universalistic ideal, often highlighted in his thought. However, we need only to turn to Rashi's commentary on the verse in the Torah to discover that Rashi himself elucidated the verse of the *Shema* as a prayer for a universal recognition of God and his kingship. The following is a citation of Rashi's explanation on the Torah verse of the *Shema*: 'Hashem who is our God now, but not the god of the other nations, He is destined to be the "One God,"...as it says, "On that day, Hashem will be One and His name One" (*Zecharia* 14:9).

Rashi is plainly suggesting that the intent that a Jew should elicit when reciting this all-important verse is to envision a day that not only will the Jew know the oneness of God but all mankind will share in this essential belief.

### PRAYING NEAR A WINDOW

The Talmud (*Berachot* 34a) teaches that one should pray in a room that has windows: "Rabbi Chiya bar Abba said in the name of Rabbi Yochanan, 'A person should pray only in a house .that has windows, as the *pasuk* says, "And there were windows opened in the upper floor facing Yerushalayim"' (*Daniel* 6:11).

What is the importance of praying in a place with windows? Some commentators

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have suggested that the window open to the sky will inspire the one praying to be aware of the heavens above and more readily feel God's presence. Rav Kook offered his own novel perspective and suggested the window signifies the notion that the one praying be concerned with the greater world in which he lives. Prayer is not meant to isolate or separate a person from society. Quite the contrary. Prayer is supposed to give the person even greater energy, drive and fortitude to share the values and wisdom of the Torah with all humanity and to impact the world with the light of God's goodness.

This is why a person should pray in a house where there are windows, so that the ability to look outside reminds of his obligation to the world in which he lives.

Rav Kook takes note of one more detail which must not be overlooked in the talmudic teaching above. Praying where there are windows is not sufficient. Rather, they must face Yerushalayim, as the verse emphasizes: "facing Yerushalayim," We can only change the world when the Jews message is grounded in the values and ideals that emanate from the holy city of Yerushalayim. In other words, by committing ourselves to a deep faithfulness to the mitzvot and halacha we then radiate our illumination and wisdom to the world and work towards achieving perfection for

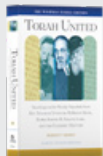
all mankind.

### RAV KOOK'S PERSONAL PRACTICE

Rav Yaakov Moshe Charlop, Rav Kook's eminent student, recalled the way that his master, Rav Kook, recited the Shema when they prayed in the Yeshiva. When reaching the *Shema*, Rav Kook would elongate the first line of the *Shema* to such an extent that the rest of the students praying had finished the entire recitation of *Shema* while Rav Kook still had not finished the opening line. Rav Charlop once asked his master why he elongated the opening line of the *Shema* to such a degree. Rav Kook answered in the following way: "I will not move on from the sentence of the *Shema* until I have implanted faith in God in every member of *Am Yisrael*." (*Haggadah Ayalet Hashachar*, Yitzchak Dadon, pp. 171-172)

One lesson to be gleaned from the above beautiful vignette is that the reciting of the *Shema* was not seen by Rav Kook as merely serving as a personal acceptance of God's sovereignty but a truth that must be lovingly diffused among all the Jewish people.

In addition to the Jewish people embracing a deep faith in God, the message of God's oneness, kingship and compassion must also be disseminated to all mankind. This is emblematic of the messianic vision of the Jewish people and is to be in the consciousness of the Jew's mind. Indeed, a Jew steadfastly articulates this exalted vision at the conclusion of all the three prayers of the day (in the *Aleinu* prayer): "On that day, Hashem will be One and His name One" (*Zecharia* 14:9). ■



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